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AUTHOR Fouts, Jeffrey T.
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ABSTRACT

A sample of six small, liberal arts, Christian colleges were compared to schools within the structural classification of liberal arts colleges. The comparison was based on 11 environmental dimensions measured by the Institutional Functioning Inventory (IFI), which used the collective perception technique (i.e., the combined responses of all faculty and administrators). Normative data for private liberal arts colleges were derived from 5,877 faculty and administrators from 96 schools. It was found that the sample of small, liberal arts, Christian colleges were perceived to provide far fewer intellectual and aesthetic extracurricular activities on campus than the larger liberal arts colleges. While the liberal arts colleges do not appear to put high priority on research and scholarship, the sample colleges see this area as even less important. The sample colleges are also perceived to have less diversity on campus in terms of the types of people that work at and attend the colleges, and behavioral and social expectations are more clearly defined and enforced. They are slightly more traditional in their educational practices and have slightly less community involvement than the liberal arts colleges. Finally, higher feelings of community and belief in the objectives of the institution are found on the campuses of Christian colleges. (SW)

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ALTERNATIVE ENVIRONMENTS: DIVERSITY AMONG LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

Jeffrey T. Fouts

School of Education

Seattle Pacific University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Abstract

A sample of six, small, Christian colleges within the structural classification of liberal arts colleges were assessed on environmental dimensions and compared to the population norm of liberal arts colleges. They differed along several environmental characterisitics, suggesting a subgroup of colleges and alternative educational experiences affecting student development.

Alternative Environments: Diversity Among Liberal Arts Colleges

Educators and psychologists have long been interested in studying the affects of various educational settings on student learning and development. Through meta-analysis psychosocial characteristics of educational settings have been shown to predict learning and development at the elementary and secondary level (Haertel, Walberg, & Haertel, 1981), and Astin (1977) concluded from 10 years of research on colleges and universities that various environments affect student development in numerous areas. Correspondingly, as long ago as the early 1970's the Carnegie Commission (1973) recommended that students be allowed to choose among colleges of diverse intellectual and social environments to find an appropriate match to their interests and needs.

The traditional structural classifications of colleges and universities focus on easily observable institutional characteristics, but are simplistic approaches to understanding the experiential nature of the college and university. A number of high-inference

measures have been developed to measure educational environmental differences, and several for specific use in higher education (Chavez, 1984).

Distinguishing among colleges on environmental criteria using only traditional structual classifications has proven complex. Numerous studies have shown that liberal arts colleges are not an homogeneous class. Fouts and Hales (1985) described the environments of a sample of 6 liberal arts colleges that were very small and non-selective, with a strong religious emphasis. While some diversity among the sample was noted, it was concluded that the colleges were similiar in the environmental dimensions mesured by the Institutional Functioning Inventory (IFI) (Peterson, Centra, Hartnett, & Linn, 1970). None of the colleges deviated substantially from the other colleges on more than one or two scales. When the IFI scale means were ranked for each institution and correlated between all institutional pairs, the median Spearman coefficient was .91. The total sample environmental description produced a generalization that was close to any individual sample college. A

resulting question from this study is, "In which areas are these colleges unique; that is, in what ways are they distinguishable from other liberal arts colleges with which they are usually classified?

RESEARCH DESIGN

In response to this question it became necessary to compare the data from the Fouts and Hales study to data on colleges that comprise the traditional classification of "liberal arts colleges." The IFI provides 11 environmental scale scores ranging from 0 (low) to 12 (high), based on the collective perception technique, that is, the combined responses of all faculty and administrators. Intellectual-Aesthetic Extracurriculum (IAE), Freedom (F), Human Diversity (HD), Concern for Improvement of Society (IS), Concern for Undergraduate Learning (UL), Democratic Governance (DG), Meeting Local Needs (MLN), Self-Study and Planning (SP), Concern for Advancing Knowledge (AK), Concern for Innovation (CI), and Institutional Esprit (IE) comprise the 11 environmental scales of the IFI. The data may be examined institution by institution, or as a total sample, resulting in a composite mean for

each environmental scale.

Normative data for private liberal arts colleges have been derived from 5877 faculty and administrators, representing 96 private liberal arts colleges. Using the normative sample as a population, 11 tests for significance (z statistic) were computed, comparing the sample colleges' composite means (n = 126) to the private liberal arts colleges on the 11 scales of the IFI.

RESULTS

Figures 1 presents the sample institutional means distribution for the Institutional Functioning Inventory displayed against the normative data grand mean. Figure 2 presents the total sample mean and the normative data grand mean for the IFI. When compared to the liberal arts colleges, the sample college means were lower on all scales of the IFI except for Institutional Esprit.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 About Here

Table I presents the results of the IFI scale mean

comparisons. Significant differences ($P < .001$) were found on seven of the 11 scales. Of particular note are the substantially lower scores on IAE, F, HD, and AK.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The small, liberal arts, Christian colleges of this sample were perceived to provide far fewer intellectual and aesthetic extracurricular activities on campus than the larger liberal arts colleges (IAE), and while the liberal arts colleges do not appear to put high priority on research and scholarship (AK), the sample colleges see this area as even less important. The sample colleges are also perceived to have less diversity on campus in terms of the types of people that work at and attend the colleges (HD), and behavioral and social expectations are more clearly defined and enforced (F). They are slightly more traditional in their educational practices (CI), and have slightly less community involvement than the liberal arts colleges (MLN). Finally, higher feelings

of community and belief in the objectives of the institution are found on these campuses (IE). In answer to the specific research question, these colleges do provide a unique environment apart from the traditional classification of "private liberal arts" colleges.

The research on these sample colleges suggests a subgroup of liberal arts colleges that are very small and non-selective, with a very strong religious emphasis -- three institutional types that Astin (1977) identified as affecting college student outcomes in various ways. The interaction of these three institutional characteristics and resulting environment may provide educational experiences and related outcomes deemed desirable by some. Longitudinal research on students in these colleges should provide clarification of the affects that such environments have on student development. The degree to which a college can alter development is not clear. Moos concluded that "environments contribute to stability and predictable change more than they do to differential change (1979, p. 270)." Nonetheless,

these institutions add diversity to the educational system and possible college outcomes, and provide alternatives during college selection.

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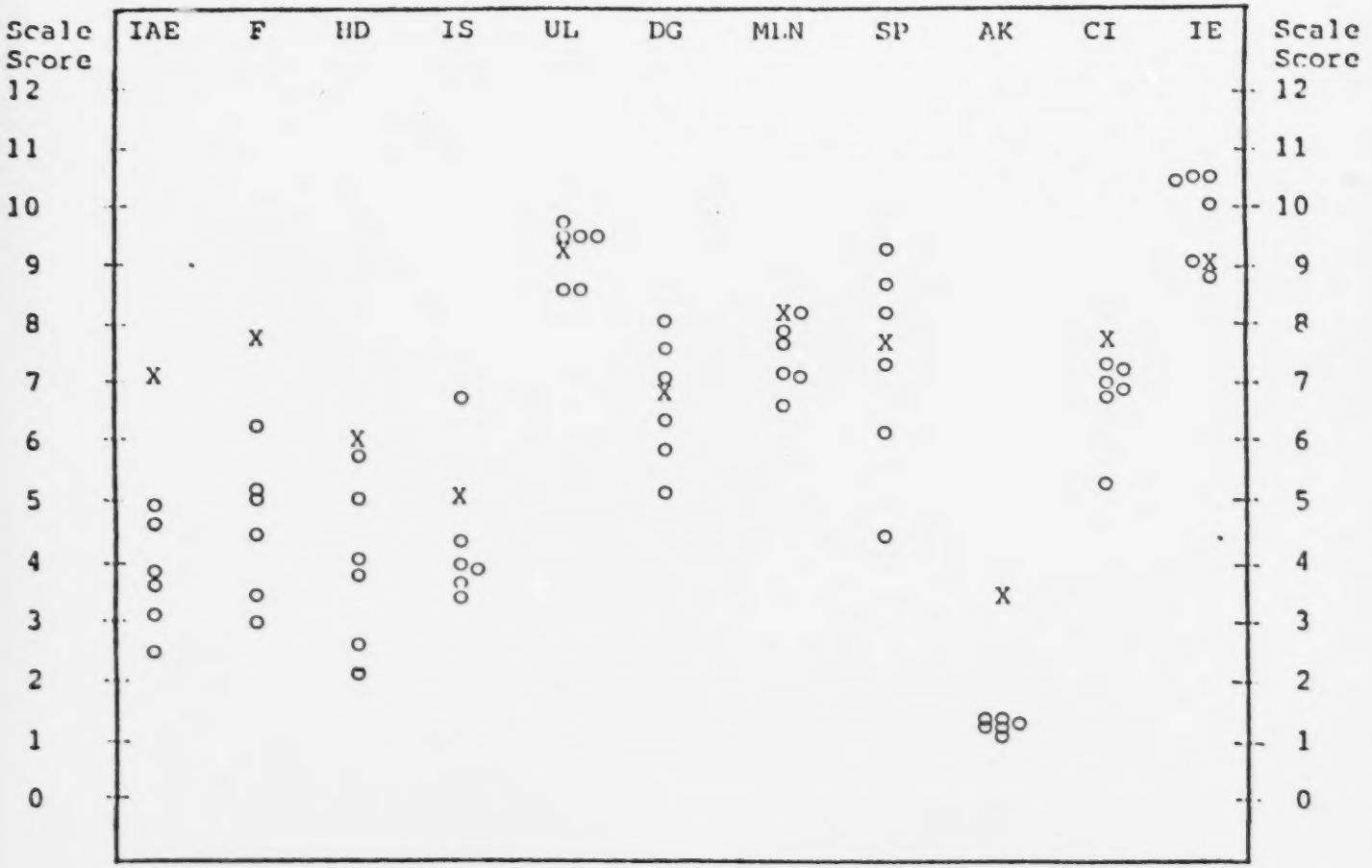

Figure 1. Sample institutional means (o) distribution for the 11 scales of the IFI. (X) Denotes normative data means for liberal arts colleges.

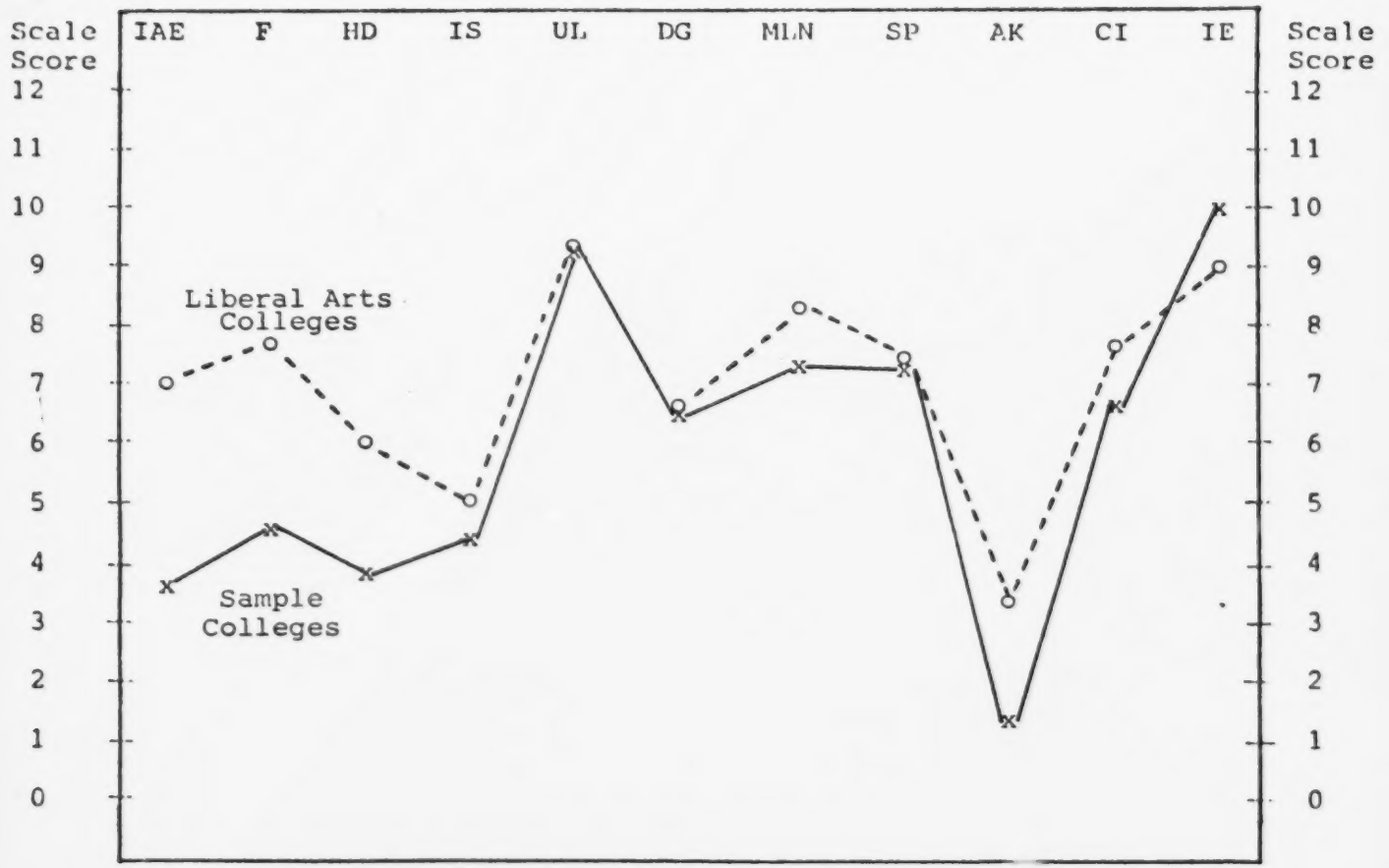

Figure 2. Scale means for liberal arts colleges and sample colleges. (o) Denotes normative data means for liberal arts colleges; (x) denotes sample college means.

Table 1

Institutional Functioning Inventory Scale Mean Comparisons of Sample Colleges - Liberal Arts Colleges

Scale	Liberal Arts		Sample		z
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Intellectual-Aesthetic Extracurriculum	7.04	2.88	3.71	2.22	-13.0*
Freedom	7.72	2.88	4.49	2.34	-12.6*
Human Diversity	5.96	2.76	3.87	2.30	-8.5*
Concern for Improvement of Society	4.98	2.86	4.44	2.71	-2.1
Concern for Undergraduate Learning	9.34	1.92	9.25	1.52	-0.5
Democratic Governance	6.72	3.76	6.53	3.43	-0.6
Meeting Local Needs	8.28	2.66	7.32	2.08	-4.1*
Self Study and Planning	7.58	2.98	7.25	2.86	-1.2
Concern for Advancing Knowledge	3.58	2.22	1.42	1.33	-10.9*
Concern for Innovation	7.70	2.86	6.73	2.59	-3.8*
Institutional Esprit	9.04	3.04	9.96	2.22	3.4

*Significant at the .001 Level.